The Street Where You Read

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Scholarly essays generally end with a solemn list of names to be thanked: teachers who showed the way, colleagues who corrected the errors, foundations who paid the bills. Altogether the loveliest acknowledgement I ever saw appeared in an essay by the anthropologist Shiv Visvanathan. This analyzed the Cold War through the novels of John Le Carre and ended by thanking 'the pavement sellers of Delhi, on whose wares my article is based.'

Like Visvanathan, I have a lifelong and countrywide experience of sellers of old books. I studied in Delhi and Calcutta, visit Bombay frequently, and call Bangalore my hometown. The chaps I know best in these cities are those who sell old books. I go to them for business and for pleasure, to buy light stuff for night-time reading and to search out research materials that our libraries do not stock.

The market I have known longest is the Sunday book bazaar in Delhi. This starts from Delhi Gate, and extends on the left side of the pavement almost all the way to Jama Masjid. It begins unpromisingly, with science and medical textbooks, but as one goes along the novels and biographies make their appearance. Experience has taught me what to pass over and where to linger. There is a shop just short of Golcha Cinema which has a fine collection of old history and anthropology books. A little further, beyond the Moti Mahal restaurant is a sour fellow who stocks illustrated works on art and nature. At the end of the street, just before the over bridge, is a stall that specializes in the spillover from the capital's libraries.

In twenty years as a workaday writer, I have published several million words, of which only about a thousand have actually helped anyone other than myself. These were contained in an article I published in a Delhi newspaper in 1992 after the city's police commissioner summarily evicted the pavement bookstalls in Daryaganj, holding them to be an encroachment on public space. Allow me to quote excerpts from what I wrote in response:

> Without holding a brief for other forms of encroachment on government land, one can only say that the Daryaganj bookshops are episodic, not permanent; that a weekly bazaar is one of the most charming and widely prevalent features of Indian life; and that in furthering the sale of old books the Daryaganj shops are a public service, rather than a nuisance . . . Should the commissioner prevail, an institution as vital to the capital's cultural life as the Siri Fort or Kamani auditoriums, will be lost forever. I shall feel the loss more keenly than most; since I was a schoolboy, a good proportion of my time, and most of my money, has been spent in secondhand book stalls.
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> . . . [F]or many of us, the prospect of Delhi without the Daryaganj bazaar will be too painful to contemplate. As a petty and philistine exercise of power, the police commissioner's campaign can only be compared to Mrs. Maneka Gandhi's equally mindless drive against performing animals and their owners. That drive was undone by the ballot box, but it is unfortunately the case that bureaucratic ordinances are usually more permanent than ministerial fiats. Perhaps the only course is to remove oneself to Bombay, Calcutta or Ahmedabad.

My essay sparked a wider campaign to save the market, into which were drawn a former cabinet secretary who wrote novels and a high policeman who wrote poems. Thankfully, the order was rescinded, and the market returned. And thankfully, too, police commissioners in other cities of India have not sought to emulate that act of (luckily withdrawn) vandalism.

The pavement sellers in Bombay's Flora Fountain know their books better than their Delhi counterparts, and charge more. I shall always associate these stalls with one of the city's more gifted writers: Dom Moraes, who's *Green is the Grass,* written when the author was thirteen, I have picked up on two separate occasions, the second copy a replacement for the first—this borrowed by a friend and never returned. (I have since learnt that Mr. Moraes himself does not own a copy.) Some shops specialize in old Penguins; others in pirated books one (behind the High Court) even in art and architecture. A short distance away, near Metro Cinema, lies the New and Second-hand Bookshop, with its two floors of old stuff stacked from floor to ceiling.

Calcutta, it must be said, has a grossly inflated reputation as a city of book lovers. Certainly, the stalls at College Street, once so renowned for their stocks, now sell nothing but college texts. Indeed, the only worthwhile shop is not on the pavement but in a building just off the street. This is Subarnarekha, run by an occasional publisher of left literature who is not above stocking cricket books for the more bourgeois members of his clientele. Of more worth, till their recent eviction, were the shops located on the pavement between Gariahat and Gole Park in south Calcutta, in a smoky, dimly lit stretch finely described in the opening pages of Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Shadow Lines.* These stalls would keep a range of history, fiction, and social science books, a surprisingly low proportion of which were of Marxist provenance.

Here and there on the street in the city one might still buy old novels. But it is more or less clear that the used-book market in Calcutta is dying. In Madras, alas, it is dead, extinguished fifteen years ago by the arsonist who, at the behest of the property mafia, burnt down the Moore Market, within whose red walls lay at least forty bookshops. Moore Market was lucky in its location—right next to the Madras Central Railway Station. The broad verandahs of the rectangular red building were lined with bookstores, some spilling over into the interior. While most stalls had eccentrically mixed collections, some were more focused in their choice of what to stock: one shop was even known for its collection of books on, and magazines about, the game of bridge. The fire that devastated Moore Market was widely believed to be sabotage. In any case, it was to the Madras book trade what the demolition of the Babri Masjid was to Indian secularism: a single, definitive and comprehensively destructive act of annihilation.

It is curious how particular bazaars call to mind particular books. The used book trade in Ahmedabad finds expression, as in Delhi, in a colourful market that unfolds itself once a week, on Sundays, under Ellis Bridge. Here, bookstalls run cheek by jowl with sellers of pots and pans, nuts and bolts, and steel almirahs. On half a dozen visits, I never failed to pick up a copy of *The God that Failed,* a collection of essays by writers disenchanted by communism, such as Arthur Koestler and Ignazio Silone. The book was the perfect present to take back to the Calcutta intellectuals in whose midst I then lived.

Pavement bookstalls are in some respects quite different from stores housed in more permanent structures. These latter are usually run by men who are keenly aware of the nature and value of what they stock. By contrast, a visit to the pavement is rich in the unexpected, for one never knows what one will find, and at what price. It can also be a test of character. For example, if you sight a Verrier Elwin first edition, it takes an effort of will to keep the thrill out of your limbs and out of your voice. The trick is to casually hold the book between two fingers, pretend to look elsewhere in the pile, while casually asking the owner the price. But more often than not, he has noticed the way your eyes lit up when they chanced upon the book. This, indeed, is psychological warfare of a high order. There is, however, one situation when you are assured of victory; when rain clouds gather overhead, book

prices come tumbling down as fast as the mercury. Faced with the end of the day's business, the man will sell you the Elwin for half the price he would ask when unthreatened by nimbus.

Also on Ellis Bridge, if in a very permanent old stone building, is the New Order Book Company, established as far back as 1939. I first visited the place in the early 1980s, but was intimidated by the learning of its founder and owner, Dinkar *bhai,* and the prices of his books. He was very superior with me, as he needed to be, for he was accustomed to dealing with the Tatas and the Sarabhais. Feeling for my pride and—perhaps more crucially—for my wallet, I chose to patronize the Sunday Market the other side of the bridge.

Last year I was back in Ahmedabad and, a working man now, walked into New Order. Dinkar *bhai* was dead, but his work was carried on by his wife, Saroj *behn,* and her assistant, Leela *behn.* Judging by the dust and cobwebs I might have been the only visitor there in months. I was allowed to potter around. When I enquired about stuff on Gandhi, I was asked to come home to look at the books there: lunch was also offered. The two ladies gave me a lift, in an ancient Fiat driven by a more ancient driver. En route we made several stops, to allow Saroj *behn* to buy the *roti* and *sabzi* she needed for the unexpected guest.

The house, when we got to it, was out of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* and *Bleak House,* combined. No outsider had been in it for years. A bra lay carelessly draped over a sofa: it could have belonged to Miss Havishitm. The grime on the bathroom mirror was a couple of inches thick. Still, what stood out was the old lady's devotion to her husband's work (they had no children). She was very pleased when I told her I owned a copy of New Order's very good and very scarce reprint of the set of Gandhi's journal, *Young India;* Dinkar *bhai,* she said, had planned also to reprint its successor, *Harijan.* In fact, some old issues of *Harijan* lay around the house. I demanded to see them and, when they came, bought them. The prices the lady charged made me deeply ashamed of what I had once felt about her husband.

My own favourite of all India's second-hand bookshops is Bangalore's Select, run by K.K.S. Murthy from an unprepossessing white building situated in a quiet lane off Brigade Road. Murthy's father, K.B.K. Rao, was a local legend, both for his charm, a part of which lay in his ability to consistently undervalue his books. The son, who has inherited the charm, has acquired a national reputation through his biannual appearances at the World Book Fair in Delhi.

Some years ago, a friend who knows my passion for used-bookstores visited Hay-on-Wye, the village on the Welsh border where there are some fifty such stores. There he picked up, for me, a limited edition of this John Arlott poem:

The sunlight filters through the panes
of book-shop windows, pockmarked grey
By years of grimy city rains,
And falls in mild, dust-laden ray
Across the stock, in shelf and stack,
Of this old bookshop-man who brought,
To a shabby shop in a cul-de-sac,
Three hundred years of print and thought.

Like a cloak hangs the bookshop smell,

soothing, unique and reminding:
The book-collector knows its spell,
Subtle hints of books and binding—
In the fine, black bookshop dust paper,
printer's-ink and leather,
Binder's-glue and paper-rust.
And time, all mixed together.

'Blake's Poems, Sir—ah, yes, I know,
Bohn did it in the old black binding,
In '83.' Then shuffles slow
To scan his shelves, intent on finding
This book of songs he has not heard,
With that deaf searcher's hopeful frown
Who knows the nightingale,
a bird With feathers grey and reddish-brown.

This was written about a bookshop in a small Sussex or Hampshire town, but the spirit certainly applies to other such shops elsewhere in the world, and three lines seem to have been written for the Select Bookshop of K.B.K. Rao and K.K.S. Murthy: 'This old bookshop-man who brought/ To a shabby shop in a cul-de-sac/ Three hundred years of print and thought.'

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What kinds of books might one pick up in these places? Once, in Select, my eyes seized upon a pamphlet exquisitely bound in green and gold cloth. From its size and appearance I thought it might be a rare nationalist tract, a first edition of a Tagore lecture perhaps. When I opened it I found that the first few pages were written over in hand. 'This is the horoscope of my daughter Janaki, born on March 22, 1910', the text began. Three or four pages of astrological calculations followed. These were then bound up with the Tamil calendar, or *panchangam,* for 1910—11. Although Mr. Murthy charged an excessive price (fifty rupees) I brought the pamphlet home and showed it to my grandmother, who is named Janaki, and who, as it happens, was born on March 22, 1910. She confirmed that it was indeed her horoscope. 'After your grandfather died', she told me, 'our possessions were scattered here and there, and I lost many things.'

My collection includes many books that have passed through the hands of the rich or famous. On the road in Daryaganj I bought *Duleep: His Man and His Game,* a rare, privately printed volume of tributes in memory of the great cricketer K.S. Duleepsinhji. It was a presentation copy, given to the former owner by the dashing left-handed Test batsman, K.M. (Khandu) Rangnekar. Behind the High Court in Bombay I once bought a massive book on Berlin by Giles McDonough. After I reached home I saw that the prelim pages had been carefully pasted together; cutting them open, I discovered that the author had previously presented the book to that column of Bombay society, Camelia Panjabi. Then, in Mr Jayavelu's still-mourned shop in Moore Market, I happened upon a first edition of Verrier Elwin's *Maria Murder and Suicide.* This was inscribed 'To Violet, with love from Joachim.'

These were Joachim and Violet Alva, Congress politicians who read and appreciated books that their heirs (also Congress politicians) evidently had no place for.

The last time I was in Bombay, I had arranged to meet an old friend for lunch in Churchgate. I spent the hour before our meeting on the pavement. Here I saw a collection of science fiction stories edited by Kingsley Amis, dating to the 1960s. When we were in college my friend had liked this kind of stuff. Since our lunch was, among other things, a nostalgia trip, I bought the Amis to gift him. When I handed it over he looked inside—which I had omitted to do—and found from the fly-leaf that this was the very copy which he and his wife had gifted one of *their* friends twenty years.' before.

But the most curious of all my purchases was a little biography of Gandhi I bought at the New and Second-hand Bookshop. This was written by a priest, Joseph Doke, and first published in 1907. Although my copy was a later reprint, I was glad to have it, for the author had been a close associate of Gandhi's. I asked the shop to post it to me in Delhi, where I then lived. When the book arrived and I opened it again I noticed that the one-time owner's name was written on the fly-leaf: 'Gopalktishna Gandhi, July 1957.' I knew this man well, and in fact his hand had scarcely changed in thirty-five years. I immediately went over to his place with the hook. He had forgotten that he once owned it. But he remembered that in the summer of 1957 he was in Bombay, for his father was critically ill. He supposed that after his father died the book had got lost in the turmoil. I suggested that the book was rightly his. 'No, you keep it', he said generously. He then pulled out a volume from his shelf, and said: 'I have this, anyway.' This' was the first edition of the Doke book, laminated and bound for the owner by the National Archives. On the book's fly-leaf Devadas Gandhi—Gopal's father and the Mahatma's son— had written: 'This is the finest biography of Bapu.' Gopal, naturally, is well pleased with his copy of Doke. And I am more than moderately satisfied with mine.

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